

Q&A

Turner leaving Glasgow 'optimistic' on climate

By Emily Foxhall STAFF WRITER



Turner



Courtesy Mary Benton

Mayor Sylvester Turner speaks on a panel at the U.N. Climate Change Conference. "Houston has been talked about quite a bit up here," he told the Chronicle.

Mayor Sylvester Turner has been in Glasgow, Scotland, for the United Nations Climate Change Conference, or COP26. He met with the White House's national climate adviser, Gina McCarthy. He shook hands with Prince Charles. He sat in front for a presentation that included John Kerry, the special presidential envoy for climate.

Turner also took time to call home, speaking Thursday afternoon with the Houston Chronicle about the experience before returning this weekend. Turner chairs the Climate Mayors and the Global Resilient Cities networks. He's been talking with mayors from all over, he said. "We've been going all day and all night."

The conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: Why did you attend the conference?

A: It is dealing with climate change mitigation and resilience, and those issues are critically important, not just internationally, but very important for the city of Houston particularly.

In the last six years, we've faced about five federally declared disasters, just since I've been mayor. These storms are coming with greater frequency, with greater intensity. They are costing more. And that's evidenced by Winter Storm Uri (in February).

This was the convening of global international leaders to discuss the next steps on how to address something that's very real and impacting everybody. That's the reason why I'm here: I'm the mayor of the energy capital of the world. There's conversations on energy transition that directly impact the city of Houston.

Q: What were you hoping to accomplish? What has come out of it so far?

A: It's been very good. Even with the absence of the heads of state from China and India and Russia, you have, as former Secretary (of State) Kerry said the other day in a meeting with him, you have 65 percent of the world's GDP right here in Glasgow and being very supportive of recognizing that we need to accelerate our actions on climate change mitigation.

It's about hearing what the additional steps are that will be taken to address resilience and climate change mitigation, learning from what others are doing.

The focus is not just on the heads of state, but the focus is on public/private initiatives. It's on philanthropists. It's on foundations, others who are now at the table, participating in a more holistic fashion on addressing climate change.

It's about how do we fund these projects? How do we generate funding? How do we provide technical assistance for primarily cities and local governments that will further our objectives of building resilience and mitigating climate change?

Q: What is the perspective you are trying to share? What from your experience have you found important for others to know?

A: Houston has been talked about quite a bit up here.

We are the energy capital of the world, so what we do locally in terms of energy transition, reducing for example greenhouse gas emissions, will go a long way toward impacting things globally. No other city is in a position to speak to that on that scale.

We talked about the fact that we've faced several extreme weather events. So the intent is to try to find ways to mitigate the risk in all of that.

Then people know that we historically have been a car-centric city. And they have been receptive to the fact that now we are working to design a more walkable, pedestrian, livable city.

That's been well-received because when people think about the city of Houston, for those who haven't been in the city in a long time, they're looking at the city the way it was designed and built 20, 25 years ago.

Now there's a conversation on what we are now doing, how we are changing things and how we are designing things. And certainly what steps we are taking to mitigate climate change.

Houston has played a key role in many of these conversations and that's been very positive to come here and tell our story and how we are working with the energy sector. We're not trying to move away from the energy sector but how we are working collaboratively with the energy sector to move things forward in a very positive fashion.

Q: It sounds very energizing, and it sounds like interesting conversation. Anything else you want to tell our readers?

A: It's been a great deal of conversations on partnerships, collaboration, public/private partnerships.

It is heavily weighted on what the private sector is doing, the finance community is doing, philanthropies are doing, what local units of government, all across the globe,

what they are doing. And not what they're doing separate and apart, but what they are doing collectively to advance the agenda of resilience and climate change mitigation.

And the conversation is no longer just about reducing emissions. It goes beyond just reducing emissions. The frequent theme has been you cannot have climate change mitigation without resilience and you can't have either one of them without equity.

If you're not improving the lives of people in these vulnerable communities or undeveloped cities, then you're really not having an impactful change.

People will be leaving here optimistic. Because the people who are now involved in these conversations has broadened. So it's a much broader group than just the heads of these countries. And so that's been energizing. Because now you have a lot more people at the table. emily.foxhall@chron.com

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